

Jorge Luis Borges

Theme of the Traitor and Hero

So the Platonic Year Whirls out new right and wrong, Whirls in the old instead; All men are dancers and their tread Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. - W. B. Yeats, The Tower

Under the influence of the flagrant Chesterton (contrives and embellishes of elegant mysteries) and of the court counsellor Leibnitz (who invented pre-established harmony), I have imagined the following argument, which I shall doubtless develop (and which already justifies me in some way), on profitless afternoons. Details, revisions, adjustments are lacking; there are areas of this history which are not yet revealed to me; today, the third of January of 1944, I dimly perceive it thus:

The action transpires in some oppressed and stubborn country: Poland, Ireland, the Republic of Venice, some state in South America or the Balkans . . . Has transpired, we should say, for although the narrator is contemporary, the narrative related by him occurred toward the middle or beginnings of the nineteenth century. Let us say, for purposes of narration, that it was in Ireland, in 1824. The narrator is named Ryan; he is a great-grandson of the young, heroic, handsome, assassinated Fergus Kilpatrick, whose sepulchre was mysteriously violated, whose name embellishes the verse of Browning and Hugo, whose statue presides over a gray hill amidst red moors.

Kilpatrick was a conspirator, a secret and glorious captain of conspirators; he was like Moses in that, from the land of Moab, he descried the Promised Land but would not ever set foot there, for he perished on the eve of the victorious rebellion which he had premeditated and conjured. The date of the first centenary of his death draws near; the circumstances of the crime are enigmatic; Ryan, engaged in compiling a biography of the hero, discovers that the enigma goes beyond the purely criminal. Kilpatrick was assassinated in a theater; the English police could find no trace of the killer; historians declare that the failure of the police does not in any way impugn their good intentions, for he was no doubt killed by order of this same police. Other phases of the enigma disquiet Ryan. These facets are of cyclic character: they seem to repeat or combine phenomena from remote regions, from remote ages. Thus, there is no one who does not know that the bailiffs who examined the hero's cadaver discovered a sealed letter which warned him of the risk of going to the theater on that particular night: Julius Caesar, too, as he walked toward the place where the knives of his friends awaited him, was handed a message, which he never got to the point of reading, in which the treason was declared, and the names of the traitors given. In her dreams, Caesar's wife, Calpurnia, saw a tower, which the Senate had dedicated to her husband, fallen to the ground; false and anonymous rumors throughout the land were occasioned, on the eve of Kilpatrick's death, by the burning of the round tower of Kilgarvan - an event which might have seemed an omen, since Kilpatrick had been born at Kilgarvan. These parallels (and others) in the history of Caesar and the history of an Irish conspirator induce Ryan to assume a secret pattern in time, a drawing in which the lines repeat themselves. He ponders the decimal history imagined by Condorcet; the morphologies proposed by Hegel, Spengler,

and Vico; the characters of Hesiod, who degenerate from gold to iron. He considers the transmigration of souls, a doctrine which horrifies Celtic belles-lettres and which the very same Caesar attributed to the Britannic Druids; he thinks that before the hero was Fergus Kilpatrick, Fergus Kilpatrick was Julius Caesar. From these circular labyrinths he is saved by a curious species of proof which immediately plunges him into other labyrinths even more inextricable and heterogeneous: certain words spoken by a mendicant who conversed with Fergus Kilpatrick on the day of his death were prefigured in the tragedy of Macbeth. That history should have imitated history was already sufficiently marvelous; that history should imitate literature is inconceivable . . .

Ryan discovers that in 1814, James Alexander Nolan, the oldest of the hero's comrades, had translated into Gaelic the principal dramas of Shakespeare, among them Julius Caesar. In the archives he also finds a manuscript article by Nolan on Festspiele of Switzerland: vast and roving theatrical representations these, which require thousands of actors and which reiterate historic episodes in the same cities and mountains where they occurred. Still another unpublished document reveals that a few days before the end, Kilpatrick, presiding over his last conclave, had signed the death sentence of a tractor, whose name has been blotted out. This sentence scarcely harmonizes with Kilpatrick's pious attitude. Ryan goes deeper into the matter (the investigation covers one of the hiatuses in the argument) and he succeeds in solving the enigma.

Kilpatrick was brought to his end in a theater, but he made of the entire city a theater, too, and the actors were legion. And the drama which was climaxed by his death embraced many days and many nights. Here is what happened:

On the second of August of 1824, the conspirators gathered. The country was ripe for rebellion. But somehow every attempt always failed: there was a traitor in the group. Fergus. Kilpatrick ordered James Nolan to uncover this traitor. Nolan carried out his orders: before the gathering as a whole, he announced that the traitor was Kilpatrick himself. He demonstrated the truth of his accusation with irrefutable proofs; the conspirators condemned their president to death. The latter signed his own death sentence; but he implored that his condemnation not be allowed to hurt the fatherland.

Nolan thereupon conceived his strange project. Ireland idolized Kilpatrick; the most tenuous suspicion of his disgrace would have compromised the rebellion; Nolan proposed a plan which would make Kilpatrick's execution an instrument for the liberation of the fatherland. He suggested the condemned man die at the hands of an unknown assassin, in circumstances deliberately dramatic, which would engrave themselves upon the popular imagination and which would speed the revolt. Kilpatrick swore to collaborate in a project which allowed him the opportunity to redeem himself and which would add a flourish to his death.

Pressed for time, Nolan was unable to integrate the circumstances he invented for the complex execution; he was forced to plagiarize another dramatist, the enemy-Englishman William Shakespeare. He repeated scenes from Macbeth, and from Julius Caesar. The public - and the secret -

presentation took several days. The condemned man entered Dublin, discussed, worked, prayed, reproved, spoke words which seemed (later) to be pathetic - and each one of these acts, which would eventually be glorious, had been foreordained by Nolan. Hundreds of actors collaborated with the protagonist; the role of some was stellar, that of others ephemeral. What they said and did remains in the books of history, in the impassioned memory of Ireland. Kilpatrick, carried away by the minutely scrupulous destiny which redeemed and condemned him, more than once enriched the text (Nolan's text) with words and deeds of his own improvisation. And thus did the popular drama unfold in Time, until, on the sixth of August of 1824, in a theater box hung with funereal curtains, which foreshadowed Abraham Lincoln's, the anticipated pistol-shot entered the breast of the traitor and hero, who could scarcely articulate, between two effusions of violent blood, some prearranged words.

In Nolan's work, the passages imitated from Shakespeare are the least dramatic; Ryan suspects that the author interpolated them so that one person, in the future, might realize the truth. He understands that he, too, forms part of Nolan's plan . . . At the end of some tenacious caviling, he resolves to keep silent his discovery. He publishes a book dedicated to the glory of the hero; this, too, no doubt was foreseen.